

WHY I FASTED: LOSING, STANDING
AND GAINING GROUND

OR

MCC AT 21 YEARS: Have We Lost Our Way, or
Are We Just Finding It Again?
Burning with Millennial Fever!

By: Rev. Nancy Wilson

On Sept 15, 1989, I visited Chuck Farewell at County Hospital in Los Angeles. It was his 60th birthday, and I brought him yellow mums. It was the last time I saw him before he died of aids, just 8 days later. Chuck was the last of 2 remaining active "charter" members of MCC Los Angeles. He cried that day about never getting to hear the Rogers organ played in our new sanctuary. He wanted desperately to be at the Congregational Meeting the next week to urge us to do anything we had to do to finish the building.

I left the hospital with my heart burdened, my stomach in knots. Later that day, I would finally hear God's answer: I was to fast to raise enough money or in-kind gifts and loans so that we would not lose any property (ground) and be able to move into the building and complete it. From Friday until I announced this on Sunday morning, I prayed and prayed that I would not have to do this. Fear was my companion: fear of what others, including my friends, would think; Fear, that, having never really fasted, I would not be strong enough to do this. But all weekend, the conviction just grew in me. "Not one inch of ground," resounded as God's answer within me again and again. I knew I didn't even really know the depth or full meaning of this message or this task. Some would respond with understanding and sacrificial giving of time and energy and resources. Others would shake their heads, hold back, or judge me crazy. Why this piece of property? Why fast for property at all? For something material? There are so many good causes - for human rights, justice, food, medical aid! I still have only an inkling of an answer. It was this ground, this place, this



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congregation, this hour, this moment. But it is/was more than that. It is the symbolism of this the "Mother Church" of UFMCC; it is the significance of having safe space, consecrated ground for our particular movement, and God's specific revelation through UFMCC. It became a do or die moment for me, for our struggling church - enough of death, loss, hopelessness, despair, the bigotted banking industry, homophobia, enough, enough, enough!!

Now I am beginning to understand more about that 29 days. There was enormous personal healing for me. But in addition, I learned some other things that I need to be bold enough to say to our whole Fellowship.

As I write this, I am aware of several things: First of all, my deep and intense gratitude to my lover Paula and to MCCLA. What a learning, challenging time to be Pastor of such an incredible congregation! They have taught me so much. And, through MCCLA I have seen the Fellowship all over again, and know that in addition to God and Paula Schoenwether, UFMCC is the love of my life.

Being saturated at MCCLA for nearly 4 years has caused me to pull back, somewhat, from the frey of Fellowship leadership. The fast, I believe, shifted that for me once again. I find myself re-focusing on the Fellowship as a whole. One of the roles of Elder is supposed to be "apostolic witness and leadership", words I can hardly write without trembling. For me that means to hold our "feet to the fire" of the witness of the first apostles: To be out front, willing to be "sent forth" into new ministry and "territory" for Jesus Christ. To do those "greater things" Christ promised. For me it means being willing to celebrate the miracle of MCC, of what God has done for us, by risking telling what I believe God is saying to us now and wants to do for us in the future. Some of that may sound sharply critical of MCC - if it is, it is myself I criticize first.

For years now, I have been hearing what some call "The prophets of doom" saying that something is wrong - UFMCC is not growing as we did in the 70's and early 80's. There have been debates as to the accuracy of that, and some of us have gotten on the defensive. Certainly our growth rate, in the U.S. at least, has slowed. And there are theories and theories about theories! Underneath I sense an uneasiness that we don't seem to be able to identify. Some want to fix the problem, others want to fix the blame. On the other hand, signs of growth, maturity, health, a deep revival, a renewed vigor abound. Many Churches are growing. We are moving into new countries. We have creative, courageous leaders and saints. So what gives? Let me try to say what I see:

The Generational issue:

We are experiencing the death of our first generation in MCC, while our leadership and membership grows increasingly middle-aged. That was so apparent at our 20 year anniversary in Los Angeles. I was elected to the Board of Elders in 1976 at age 26, and was the youngest person ever elected Elder. Today, at age 39, I am still the youngest, although for the first time persons younger than me were nominated at the last General Conference.

The characteristics of middle-aged folks includes "middle age crises" that are crises of identity, direction, vocation. Like a second adolescence middle-agers ask "What does all this mean?" "What's it all about?" "What is my purpose in life?" We (the middle-aged) are concerned about security, much more aware of our mortality and limits, and rebelling against both! We either become less inclined to take risks, or more inclined to take foolish ones (and we look silly taking them at our age). When I apply that to the Fellowship today, to our structures and programs and to some of our churches, it kind of fits. In addition, we are the "older generation", to the enormous emerging community of gay and lesbian youth. We must get a vision of reaching out to the under 30 and

under 25 crowd. That means getting to know them and listening to them: Giving them voice and opportunity for leadership. The National Council of Churches of the Phillippines insists that 1/3rd of its ruling body be under 25! Compare that percentage to our General Council or General Conference! We must not be afraid of the young, or their ideas, feelings or questions. We must take them seriously - some of whom will be our Elders in 2005. What program or service or ministry in any of our churches or in our Fellowship has any appeal to anyone under 25 or under 20? If you were 18 and just coming out, would MCC, or General Conference be a "hot", exciting, "radical" place to be?

Then there's the other end of the spectrum. In Western culture the largest growing population is senior citizens. Seniors have more disposable income, leisure time, and energy than us middle-aged folks who are burning the candle at both ends! They are also (contrary to stereotypes) often less threatened and more open-minded and tolerant than we are. They are an incredible resource and gift - and some denominations have discovered this potential and mined it. We still don't know how to handle aging or value our seniors very well in MCC congregations (with a couple of good exceptions).

Why isn't there a senior lobby in MCC? Why aren't we hearing the anger and vigorous opinions of senior gays and lesbians as a group? Evangelism and church growth among seniors is another wave of the future - any church that ignores this, especially in the U.S., will not grow! MCC - we have to burst out of our late "30-40-50 something" ghetto.

AIDS - AIDS, I believe is our most challenging spiritual struggle to date. It tests, and will test even more, the core of our commitment, integrity, and connection to the Spirit's power. We saw a glimpse of that at General Conference. I'm just going to say it, I take AIDS very personally. It is a

personal attack on me, and on UFMCC, and on Jesus Christ. While the virus attacks the bodies of our brothers and sisters, it attacks our souls - it feeds our despair, discouragement and fear. We've said for a long time that AIDS is not a judgement from God, it's just a disease. Well, I don't agree with that either. Why is it that, with a few exceptions, AIDS is so resistant to our fervent prayers for healing? Remember the Gospel story in which Jesus tells the disciples, "Somethings can only be cast out with prayer and fasting". It's not a judgement from God, but it's more than just a disease - it is a spiritual attack on our Fellowship.

I've had a couple of experiences that I've shared with very few people. But I need to come out of the closet about this. I remember the day I saw my friend Rick O'Dell in the hallway at UFMCC Headquarters (he worked across the hall). I hadn't seen him in months, and from 40 feet away I knew suddenly that he had AIDS. For a split second, it was as if the disease itself, not Rick, looked at me and mocked me as if to say, "I've got another one!" I still remember how my feet were rivetted to the floor, how the chill ran through me, how I suppressed my fear and rage and forced myself to walk toward him. That is not the only time it has happened. Has it ever happened to you? I tried to psychologize that and other similar experiences. But I know what I know. It was not just my own projected anger and denial.

All during the fast, I woke up every morning with AIDS and friends with AIDS on my mind. During that time two central, active members, one on the Board, one charter member (Chuck) died of aids. I felt like they were casualties of a war.

I lived in the sanctuary during the fast. I saw the sanctuary years from now - with stained glass and all completed - I saw it as a shrine to the end of aids. It made me weep. The battle is about aids and more than aids - it's about

untimely deaths and illness, unprecedented losses, the incredible internalize homophobia and self-hatred of our people that produces a resistance to the gospel that is astonishing in its depth and persistence. Only God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit working through us is stronger than that resistance.

At the end of the 1st week of my fast, Rev. Ro Halford suffered a brain aneurism. After church on Sunday, my lover Paula drove me to the hospital. I was very weak that day, I had preached and "overdone it." As I prayed by Ro's bedside, I begged God to spare her life, but only if she could have all her capabilities back. Like a child bargaining, I told God that I would give up everything else that I was fasting for if God would do this one thing. There are times like that where I am so aware of the limitations and immaturity of my prayer life - and I work at it. And it's still pretty inadequate at times. Like if I just press the right buttons, and figure this all out, God will shape up and do what I know has to be done. I prayed for Ro from my deepest heart - it was genuine, but also filled with all kinds of childish impulses. I felt helpless, and pitiful. I also knew that through the fast, God had my undivided attention, and that I was to focus my prayer life on various issues, not only MCCLA's immediate needs.

Two days later, (despite unbelievable odds) Ro came through surgery successfully! It was the answered prayer of our whole Fellowship. Later that day I had a jolting pain in my chest that nearly made me pass out. It gradually subsided. But all that night I wrestled sleeplessly with doubts and fears, wondering what God was telling me. Was I to stop fasting? Was I hurting myself? Was God cashing in on my deal? Was I even capable of knowing what God wanted at this point? Why was I so afraid? On the way to my doctor the next day, I was bemoaning all this to Rev. Jane Carl. In her own not-unkind-but-still-blunt way she said, "Did God tell you this was going to be easy?" Well, come to think of

it, NO. (Thanks alot Jane!) The doctor said I was fine. I never had another physical problem during the fast. In fact, I was never even hungry. But every morning I woke up with aids as my companion, even praying about aids, other friends who were ill or struggling, for victory for our church. I would be dreaming and praying, then awake and praying.

Spiritual warfare is real and a part and parcel of the story of MCC, of MCCLA, of every Pastor, clergyperson and lay leader of MCC. And I've learned so much from charismatic friends in MCC about spiritual warfare. And, I'm a child of the 60's, with Quaker ancestors, and warfare and military images repel me! I have other music in my heart like John Lennon softly singing, "All we are saying is give peace a chance!" I don't know what to do with that apparent contradiction except to acknowledge the discomfort and keep offering all of my heart's music and struggles to God. The concept of spiritual warfare, as a metaphor, is distasteful to me. But the reality it refers to is real to me.

God has enemies in the world, and a chief one, at that. And in giving my life to Christ's service in our community at this moment in history, the enemies of God have become my enemies. And I cannot afford to be naive about that fact. I need the spiritual shield that is described in Ephesians 6, or one like it. I need wisdom that is beyond any personal wisdom of my own. I need the compassion and courage and protection that only God's Holy Spirit can provide.

The 20 Year Itch...

At least in Western countries, MCC is no longer the fad it was in the early 70's. We are not a novelty in the gay community in the U.S. and common wealth countries. There has been a very superficial saturation, and in some contexts, we are old news (in old missionary terms, we have some "burned over districts"). Some of you, in reading this will protest. But I think it is true. Many of us

never thought about the possibility of this day dawning. We have managed in 20 years to begin to bring to the attention of the Western world, the mainline church, and even to some other cultures a revolutionary revelation of God's love for gay men and lesbians just as we are. However, the far reaching implications of that message and deeper and broader issues it inevitably raises are, I think, frightening even to us. We did open a kind of Pandora's box (not in the negative sense). We cannot (though some would like to) limit and control that revolutionary revelation; it has a life of its own. One of the joys of working with Troy Perry is that I know he knows this. Troy is secure enough to be humble enough to know that while he was the Chief Midwife at the birth of UFMCC, it is not his baby - it is The Christ Child, born all over again, and he was privileged to witness and serve at the nativity. It is God's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. But we cannot control its growth, direction, or what else it gives birth to! It bears fruit of its own.

Our original message still echoes and shocks and births new spiritual life in many places all over the world, and will continue to do so. But it is tame and anemic and stale in some places. Where is the new boldness in our preaching and teaching? What are the theological and pastoral and social justice frontiers, and who is exploring those frontiers for us? Who will go for us?

Millennial fever is only just beginning to burn as we enter the last decade before the 3rd millenium. Will our church be on the cutting edge in the 3rd millenium, or just an interesting footnote toward the end of the 2nd? This is one question that burned within me during the fast.

The "R" Word:

For a short time in the early to mid eighties I think we got a little serious about dealing with racism in UFMCC. But it passed, and aids, and other economic and political stresses pushed us into safer and more comfortable pursuits.

I was shocked and dismayed when for two years in a row Samaritan Orientation classes had just one person of color (and that's not Samaritan's fault!). We are losing ground here, and I do not hear the cries of outrage! The percentage of ethnic minorities worldwide, among our clergy is not increasing, but decreasing. There are a meager handful of UFMCC congregations in Western countries that have a significant outreach to blacks, hispanics, or asians, even in cities where those racial groups are over-whelmingly predominate. In response, people have founded non-MCC Churches that reach out to ethnic minorities.

Mostly, this is not intentional. Sadly, it is just a matter of not caring enough to pay the price to change it.

If we are not going to remain vastly, overwhelmingly, white with a couple of dabs of color here and there, we have to repent, and we have to do it now. We have to stop in our tracks, face the problems and the incredible challenges and seize the moment. This is emergency - it is war! It is spiritual warfare against one of the most vicious, ruling principalities ever known: Racism. Racism is sin - and that sin goes unchallenged in much of MCC.

That means we have to invest money, time, energy, training, and creativity to turn this around. We have to fight this war not only with our lips. We have to identify the emerging leadership, clergy and lay, of ethnic minorities in UFMCC. We have to raise and spend money to train them and equip them to evangelize the gays and lesbians in their communities. We have to tear down the barriers that make it twice or three times as hard for them to get licensed and to pursue fulltime ministry, or to get elected to positions in our Fellowship. I don't want to serve a church that does not care if it reaches ethnic minorities in our community. And right now there are pitifully few messages, of a budgetary,

personnel or structural theological nature that signal that we give a damn. Somehow we hope "they'll" find us, in our white ghettos, and persist enough, and climb over the walls we put up, to get the same good news that we have. That is un-Biblical. Do our frantic church growth efforts have invisible "Whites only" signs on them? Is that one reason we're not growing in some places?

At our recent Southwest District Conference, where over 200 people attended, there were 3-5 people of color, one of whom was from another District ! Is that just an accident? Or an exception? I think not. It's not enough for some of us to care a little about this. Some of us have to care so much we put our reputations and time and resources on the line to create change. The present status and trends regarding and including ethnic minorities in UFMCC is unacceptable and shameful. Millennial fever needs to burn on this issue! We are discouraging and driving away many of the people of color who have struggled for years to hold out hope for people of color in UFMCC.

Men and Women - recently it seems as though women District Coordinators are becoming extinct, or at least, eclipsed for a time. The General Council is now overwhelmingly white male, and growing increasingly so. Not only that, but I noticed a curious thing. All but about 3 of the men on the General Council are fairly large, tall men, strong and healthy looking. All of them are also capable, competent, good, spiritual men, who I like and love. But I think there is a psychological issue here. The Fellowship is worried sick about the deaths of so many men - we have not dared to really even count them. We long for our men to be well and strong, for aids to be over. So we elect on the General Council a picture of what we want! It makes sense to me, and it fills me with compassion for us, and with more grief.

I grieve because in this crisis women in UFMCC have been the backbone, the nursemaids, the strength of the Fellowship alongside men and sometimes alone. And at the same time we're taking a beating in our own issues. Over and over again, women's issues are trivialized or postponed. And tensions between men and women get dumped into theological issues, or onto people like Rev. Frodo Okulum who dares to reach out to lesbians outside of Christianity. I think the Fellowship has been reacting, worldwide, to a fear that, left unchecked, especially with Aids, women will take over UFMCC. Feminist or not, almost every woman in MCC harbors the deep suspicion that if aids were primarily a lesbian disease, the men, in general, would not, or could not be there for us the way we are for them. And those of us who understand sexism do not view that as a personal issue, but as a sociological reality. Men and women are just trained differently from childhood.

In addition, on the Council and in Fellowship, very butch women or effeminate men are so much less visible, as our internalized sexism and homophobia is acted out. Lest you think I am overstating this, I think of our recent election for District Coordinator in the Southwest District. Our popular outgoing, attractive, and frankly, respectably feminine (sorry Judy!!) District Coordinator met with the candidates. To a person they were dressed for success, men in business suits and tie (the one with the sweater got the least votes), women looking hot and in suits and makeup. Black suits and power ties were apparent. I commented to a colleague about what a pretty bunch they were, to which my colleague responded, "Yeah, they don't even look queer, do they?" - with obviously pride and approval! And suddenly I felt shame and confusion. I certainly didn't want them to dress in rags or blue jeans, with chains, or traces of fairy dust! Or looking unkept. I liked how they looked! But mixed in with that were powerful covert messages. That troubles me still. Where have all the fairies gone, and the "dinosaur dykes?"

Among many men I believe there is the fear of women's power; and among many women the resentment of having to care for men who do not share power easily or at all. The worst thing we can do is not ever talk about our feelings. We pride ourselves in UFMCC of being a great successful experiment in mutual ministry among women and men. We must never forget the price that has been paid for that, and that our experiment is still fragile and needs a lot of tender loving care, a lot of honesty, a lot of risking.

Laity and Clergy - Then there is the matter of clergy and laity. Having Quaker ancestry has also hampered me here. I don't exactly understand ordination, although I feel ordained. I feel a comraderie with clergy that is deep and strong. But I feel that also with many lay leaders. This identity crisis is not new, not our invention. Early on the Church created a "class" of clergy and extended privileges. It also exacted a price for the privileges. All in all, I think its kind of a mess. In the midst of that, we've done some bold and courageous things in UFMCC for mutual ministry. We still confuse gifts and skills with offices and titles at times, but at least were talking about it. We need to do more, not less, experimentation.

It is still true that a clergy persons vote at General Conference is worth 100 times that of a lay persons vote. The laity have a representative (presbyterian) system, and the clergy represent ourselves! It is the clearest inequity in our system that goes unchallenged. Anyone looking from the outside can see it! Brilliant and prophetic and articulate as we clergy are (abundantly clear at General Conferences as we hog the floor), there's something wrong here!! Is some of our church growth dilemma a symptom of frustration of the laity?

International Growth - When we passed our GSS proposal in 1985, I felt painfully aware that it did not address the International needs and future growth of

UFMCC. At our last General Conference we pushed at that issue, but could not seem to move forward.

Our present World Church Extension structure, or lack of it, is a tight lid on a boiling pot of potential world-wide explosion of UFMCC. I suspect that some of us, are silently terrified by the prospect of a UFMCC dominated by non-Westerners...But we are too embarrassed to even face that fear. In the 90's we will either let go of that fear, and structure and fund UFMCC for world-wide ministry (that could include National Churches); or blow apart into unconnected National or regional movements; or worse, remain an interesting religious "quirk" of deteriorating Western civilization, at the end of the 2nd millenium. It is a choice.

Class - The desire, even hunger for respectability is the mark of an emerging middle class. MCC was founded largely by working class folks, who reached out to rich and poor alike. Over the years we have begun to attract the upper eschelons of the working class who aspire to, or pass for, middle class. We really have only a handful of securely upper middle to upper class people. Most of us (including myself) who pass for middle class mostly have poor or working class roots.

It is the marginally middle class who are the most conservative, the most concerned about security. People who feel like they have almost "made it" need to distance themselves from the poor. The reason for this is that in their fears, they are only a few paychecks away from poverty, homelessness, bankruptcy, from "them".

Solidly working class folks are more secure. They don't think they'll ever be middle class, so they relax! They'll give their last \$5 in the offering plate

and trust that all will be Ok. Respectability is not particularly important for these folks - they see through it. They don't care what you wear to church, as long as you come.

It is the folks with aspiration for upward mobility, who want MCC to downplay our street ministry, jail and prison ministry, our outreach to transvestites or transsexuals, for the homeless or mental patients - as if these "conditions" are contagious. Like solidly working class people, upper class or security upper middle class people are not as threatened or embarrassed by these ministries, because they do not fear being "dragged down" by the circumstances or needs of others.

Our hunger for respectability and safety, our "don't rock the boat" mentality is directly proportionate to how threatened we are feeling about our survival and prosperity. And, I am convinced it will kill the forward movement of MCC. We've got to heal the fears of the marginally middle-class.

Just look at how difficult it has been for us to maintain or support jail and prison ministries, or social action ministries. We have withdrawn from these - (with many notable and admirable exceptions in local congregations). But they are exceptions, not the rule. Maybe it is that our resources, time, energy and hearts are overwhelmed in ways they weren't 10 and 15 years ago; or maybe the truth is that 10 or 15 years ago we had nothing so it was easier to share the little we had! Now the Fellowship takes in a million dollars a year - and precious little goes to those who have less. We have nothing much to do with social action outside of aids, (except attending meetings). We spend nothing on a Fellowship level for those in prison, hungry or homeless. It is a stark and startling picture. I don't feel self-righteous or "clean" myself in saying it. I have participated in creating this. It is painful to me personally. I've

often been on the other side defensively responding to those who wanted to point this out. I regret that.

When I was fasting, there were a few days when I would think of nothing else but the fact that most of the world's people go to bed hungry. That, while I had electrolytes and apple juice, some didn't even have decent water to drink. That millions of children would soon die a painful death of starvation. That what was so special and dramatic and noble and sacrificial of me was the daily, endless condition of the poor the world over! No one thinks they are noble. No one sends them flowers, cards or money. They don't have the shelter of even an unfinished brick and wood sanctuary. And their suffering has no end in sight, except for death. As I became weaker, as thinking was harder, as walking became less frequent, I thought of the incredible limited quality of life that all hungry people are doomed to.

These days I fast for one 24 hour period every week so that I will never forget. But already I know part of me has forgotten.

As I came out of the fast, I heard the Psalmist say for God, "O, that today you would harken to My voice". O, that today, UFMCC, we would harken to the voice of God in this hour. It's time to face our demons and dragons, to slay them or cast them out; to fast and pray to end aids, racism, sexism, homophobia, and the perverted hunger for security; to burn with millennial fever for the souls of our people of every age, race and condition, and nationality to stand our ground and claim new territory for the sake of a Jesus who weeps over every city and people; to move beyond the limits of our human courage; to take up our beds and walk; to tenderly carry the lambs in our arms.

Isaiah 58:6-10:

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen; to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter--when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and the Lord will say: Here am I.

If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday."

